Live ping-pong takes center stage at New York Philharmonic

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It was the first time a ping-pong table had taken center stage at the David Geffen Hall in New York, as two US national table tennis champions played each other live as part of the New York Philharmonic's Chinese Lunar New Year annual concert at the Lincoln Center on Feb 20.  
Ariel Hsing and Michael Landers, the youngest-ever US women's singles champion and US men's singles champion respectively, were featured as the ping-pong playing soloists in Andy Akiho's energetic concerto,   
The performance uses the sounds from an intense table tennis match alongside a full symphony orchestra, which saw the ping-pong players elevated at the back of the stage, like opera singers performing above an orchestra pit.  
"When we did the piece for the first time in Shanghai for the world premiere, it was something very different (playing ping-pong), so it was a little difficult to get used to it, and it really changes the way you view table tennis," said Hsing.  
"But I think at the same time, even back then, because we have been play ping-pong for so long, we still have lots of skills, that basic set, so even if we are using different material, different playing style, we still have a lot of basics," Hsing added. "As time went on, and we have more and more performances, we just get more and more accustomed to it."  
Hsing said that when she was playing she definitely took cues from the conductor, violinist and percussionist. "So it's interesting because when you were actually playing ping-pong, you can't really look at the conductor, obviously, but a lot of the starts we looked at him, and then the stops we kind of listened to the music," Hsing said.  
"I love the natural and unpredictable rhythmic pulses that the ping-pong rallies create, and I wanted to marry them with the orchestral world where unlimited timbral combinations could coexist," Akiho told China Daily.  
"We've never done anything with ping-pong before," says Bill Thomas, the executive director of the New York Philharmonic. "We're doing the piece because it's Lunar New Year and we want to do something new as a way to think about the future."  
The appearance of the work in a program of music from China — home to some of the world's greatest table tennis players and the global hub for Lunar New Year celebrations — also evokes China's ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s, with the violin part serving as an intermediary between the percussive soloists and the orchestra.  
"The piece originally had its world premiere in Shanghai and the soloist who performed it serves as the connection to the Philharmonic — our violinist Elizabeth Zeltser," says Thomas. "We kind of knew this would be interesting and then we had the idea of performing it in New York as part of our Chinese New Year Celebration. We're very excited about it."  
"Tonight's concert, of course, has Chinese characteristics, because this is what we planned to do," says Shirley Young, governor of the Committee of 100 and chair of the US- China Cultural Institute, which supports the Chinese New Year Concert and Gala. "The content of the concert is to give American audiences a little taste of Chinese culture."  
"The concerto is related to Chinese culture and history, and the soloists are two champion ping-pong players, together with other soloists with the Philharmonic," says Young. "So, this concert is obviously not a normal concert, it's definitely a great New York Philharmonic concert but with Chinese characteristics."  
The performance also featured the   
"They are real farmers, and 50 of them have come all the way from Yunnan to perform for us," says Young.  
Audiences were wowed by the performance.  Amy Melman from upstate New York says she couldn't have imagined how the ping-pong was going to be played in time with the orchestra, remarking how well the players performed.  
"The particular thing I liked most of all was how the ping-pong playing matched the rhythms of the orchestra, it was amazing,"Melman says.  
On the afternoon before the concert, traditional Chinese dragon and lion dances performed by the NaiNi Chen Dance Company wowed New Yorkers outside the Lincoln Center. Students from the National Dance Institute's performance of Chinese folk dances and a dog dressed up in traditional Chinese clothes also drew large crowds.

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